Haiti Invasion Blocked; 76 Jailed

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By Theodore A. Ediger

KEY WEST, Fla., Jan. 3 (AP)—An invasion of Haiti designed to be a stepping-stone for war against Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba sputtered out today with the roundup of dozens of armed plotters in the Florida Keys.

Most of the motley war party which included Cuban and Haitain exiles, American soldiers of fortune and even a woman, were picked up in a lightning raid on an island near Marathon.

But Rolando Masferrer, prime mover in the plot and one of the most dreaded men in Cuba when he headed a special police unit under former President Fulgencio Batista, said 50 commandos got away in a boat. He hinted that as many as 200 others escaped the U.S. customs dragnet.

Customs agents would not talk about the boat that was supposed to have got away. But the Coast Guard said it was not looking for it, and had no request to do so.

76 Men Are Booked

Fifty-one men were booked at the jail in Miami. Twenty-five were booked in Key West.

A company commander who escaped, Anton Constanzo, detailed the invasion plans, which were compact but ambitious. He said 20 exiles had already been sneaked into Haiti and were set to attack and capture a small airport at Cape Haitien, a port on the remote north coast that is a favorite target of the numerous plotters against Dictator Francois Duvalier.

A miniature air force of five planes, a B-25, a B-26, a DC-3 and two P-51s, was to use the field for staging runs at the garrison next to the presidential palace at Port-au-Prince.

Then, as rebels rallied and confusion spread in the tiny Haitain army, a seaborne commando band of 100 men or more was to go ashore at Port-au-Prince and oust Duvalier.

Father Jean Baptiste Georges, a former Haitian priest once Education Minister under Duvalier, was to be installed as president.

Within a month, Masferrer said, he would build an army to strike Cuba, only 50 miles across the Windward Passage from Haiti.

Hideaway Staked Out

But customs agents, who had staked out the island hideaway for days, stopped the Haitian adventure before it got started.

When the commandos were spotted loading a 55-foot shrimp boat last night, agents decided to strike. Fifteen agents, in four cars, raced onto the island—named Cocoa Plum, just north of Marathon, about 8:30 p.m.

They surrounded a large two-story concrete blockhouse, and the exiles came tumbling out.

The agents explained that everybody was under arrest. After mutterings and shouts in Spanish and French, the commandos lined up in a military formation and began marching toward U.S. Highway 1.

They said they were going to march to Miami to protest their arrest. Outnumbered custom agents called for help.

Twenty sheriff's deputies roared in. But the men did not stop marching until cruisers blocked the road.

Inside the house, agents found an arsenal. Masferrer said it included 100 M-1 rifles, 50 carbines, 10 automatic rifles, 15 .30-caliber machine guns, 10 .50-caliber machine guns, six 60-millimeter mortars, three 81-mm mortars and 50 Belgian rifles.

On the Barry Gray show of 2/6/64, Stanley Ross, editor of El Tiempo, according to the report of FBI Special Agent Francis J. O'Brien said Castro was behind the assassination. One of Ross's sources or inspirations was given as Pascual Enrique Ruedolo Gongora, whose record at Bellvue Hospital is quoted as that of a "Paranoid Schizophrenic". This is from Exhibit 1444, 22H863ff. Ross also attributed a pro-Castro connection to Jack Ruby. His information came from one Rolando Masferrer. An Associated Press story of "an invasion of Haiti designed to be a stepping stone for war against Premier Fidel Castro" that "sputtered out" January 3, 1967, "with the ~~arrest of~~ roundup of dozens of armed plotters in the Florida keys", says of Rolando Masferrer, that he was "prime mover in the plot and one of the most dreaded men in Cuba when he headed a special police unit under former President Fulgencio Batista." Masferrer escaped the roundup but was interviewed by the AP. US customs agent would not talk about it or his escape in a boat, and "the Coast Guard said it was not looking for it, and had no request to do so." According to an FBI report of 9/23/64 Masferrer is also known as "El Tigre".